

SDG ranking – did USM get it right?

MY VIEW -
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ANOTHER type of ranking has now surfaced. A new “product line” as it were, by a familiar commercial name, made (in)famous through similar activity based prominently on research and publication. The latter is now losing “steam” as a quality concept to define what education is all about “beyond the teaching and research focus of conventional rankings”. The current attempt is really a “Band-Aid” to include “societal impact” as the world plunged into so much problems and issues that put research and publication almost out of reach in the search for sustainable solutions to save humanity.

In this context, USM has got it spot on when it opted for a “sustainability-led” university some 15 years ago as an outcome of a scenario plan conducted in 2005 with the assistance of prominent futurologist. Before that, in 2003, a bold tagline “The University in a Garden” was introduced and adopted to bring the sustainability message home to the USM community aligned to the sejahtera campus framework.

As a result of the scenario planning exercise, USM was duly recognised by the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo, as one of seven pioneering Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the only one in Asean then. The RCE was the brainchild of the then UNU rector, Prof Hans van Ginkel, who created an alternative model to propel ESD forward especially in meeting the Millennium Development Goals throughout the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) spanning 2005-2014. Today there are more than 170 RCEs all around the world, testifying to the relevance of such alternative paradigm for education. For a long time education has been cited as “unsustainable” putting humanity at a crossroads. So back then it was not fashionable to speak about ESD (few understand it anyway!), let alone embracing it the way USM did. Thus being #1 in this sense is a foregone conclusion. There is no need for rankers.

It was not surprising therefore when the Apex initiative was announced in August 2007, by the then prime minister, USM had a two-year headstart to take part in the bid. On Sept 4, 2008 it was

declared to be the first and only Apex status university and it is so until today. It aptly adopted a new vision: “Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow” with a mission that reads: “USM is a pioneering, transdisciplinary research-intensive university that empowers future talents and enables the bottom billions to transform their socio-economic well-being.” Supporting it are six values of quality, equality, availability, accessibility, affordability, and appropriateness, and seven thrusts: the future, uniqueness, sustainability, humanity, universality, change and sacrifice. USM was ready to fly, the rest is history.

Although Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were “absent” then, yet, USM was once again futureproof when it adopted the SDGs like a duck to water. For a while, it had its ups and downs especially when the mission was not fully internalised and word “bottom billions” became a mere cliché! Such are among the challenges as universities struggled to “feed” their own student population and, of late, have to resort to food banks reportedly for the “starving” as headlined by the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry. On the other extreme, having to increase international students’ fees to make “ends meet” raises the question: Where now are the bottom billions that USM wants to enable “to transform their socio-economic well-being” as declared in the new mission statement?

For this, USM must continue to “lead” (as in the motto: Kami Memimpin) innovatively as it always has. Never be swayed to blindly follow or be compromised (commercially or politically) in translating the transformational vision into reality. Here is where the “ranking” game seems out of place for the simple reason that USM has created its own “brand” as the benchmark for a “sustainability-led” university years ahead, and endorsed by the UNU, later by Malaysia as its sole Apex status institution in crafting its own “sustainability” agenda and standards for others to emulate. By sucking up to a commercially-driven game plan after all these, left many wondering why? For one SDGs are not about “ranking” or “competing” by stacking one above the rest in isolation when it is supposed to be connecting all the 17 dots (not just 11). Clearly SDG 17 speaks about *“Partnership for the goals: To build a better world, we need to be supportive, empathetic, inventive, passionate, and above all, cooperative.”*

USM at its 50th year must have understood this well and stand tall in a class of its own to transform higher education for a sustainable tomorrow. After all, this is what Apex is about, or has the ranker changed all that?

With some four decades of experience in education, the writer believes that “another world is possible”. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com